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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews literature from the past 10 years about single fathers. Statistics are presented to show the number of single fathers, their race, socioeconomic status, religion, age, and employment. Other issues discussed include an analysis of single fathers' parenting and homemaking skills, their motivation for custody, and visiting and child support arrangements. The paper also summarizes the importance of social and emotional support systems and reviews the few studies relating to the children of single fathers. Other topics include child care arrangements and father-child relationships. (JAC)

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SINGLE CUSTODIAL FATHERS

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SINGLE CUSTODIAL FATHERS

Introduction

My investigation of single fathers grew out of my interest in male parents in general. Having worked and taught as a nurse in pediatric settings for a number of years, I have concern about the real or imagined lack of visibility of fathers. There is a paucity of literature about fathers although this data base has grown in the last ten years.

The recent interest in fathers and fatherhood is generally due to three societal changes. First, the women's liberation movement has precipitated an exodus of mothers outside of the home into the job market. A byproduct of this phenomenon is men's slower but definite move toward more affectional roles within the family. Secondly, practitioners and researchers have begun to acknowledge the fact that fathers as well as mothers affect the way that children grow and develop. There is also a growing recognition that parents not only affect children but children affect their parents; in other words, that parent-child relationships are reciprocal. A third change which parallels and has increased the interest in males as parents, is the rising occurrence of marriage dissolutions. Not only is there a marked increase of divorces, but the introduction of no-fault divorce laws have changed the principles by which custody decisions are made. We have gone from the "tender years" principle (with custody going to the mother) to that of "the best interests of the child" principle (where the best suited parent(s) receives custody).

All of these events and others have stimulated researchers to study and write about the category of parents that we know as single fathers. The purpose of this paper is to share a synopsis or composite of the findings that have appeared in the literature, all within the last 10 years, that relate to single fathers. Who are single fathers and how are they faring as sole primary parents of dependent

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children? The studies I will be drawing from include the research of: Bain (1973), Defrain and Eirick (1981), Gasser and Taylor (1976), George and Wilding (1972), Gersick (1979), Greene (1977), Hanson (1979, 1980, 1981), Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1976), Levine (1976), Lewis (1978), Loge (1976), Mendes (1975, 1976a, 1976b), Orthner, Brown and Ferguson (1976), Orthner and Lewis (1979), Pruzan (1973), Rosenthal and Keshet (1981), Santrock and Warshak (1979), Schlesinger (1978), Smith and Smith (1981), Todres (1978), and Victor and Winkler (1977). Although the actual sample sizes of these research populations are somewhat limited, there are some common themes and findings that allow us to make some generalizations which are useful for our understanding. I will summarize what we know to date, and where the data is available or appropriate, I will draw some comparisons between single mothers and single fathers.

Definition

A single custodial father is one who has physical custody of his child(ren). He assumes the primary parental responsibility without the assistance of a co-parent living in the family home. This includes fathers who are separated, divorced, widowed or adoptive parents.

Statistics

Solid statistics as to the actual numbers of single fathers in America elude us since the census bureau classifies families into the two broad categories of male or female headed households. Male-headed households with mother absent is not differentiated from male-headed households with mother present. We do have some concrete data, however, at our fingertips.

In 1976, there were 2,152,662 marriages and 1,077,000 divorces (National Center for Health Statistics, 1977a, 1977b) indicating that approximately one out of every two marriages go asunder. Every year, some 600,000 families join the ranks of single-parent households through divorce or separation alone; approximately

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10 percent or 60,000 of these become single father families[1]. By 1980, 19 percent or approximately one out of every five children in America (12 out of 62 million) were living in single parent homes. Although mothers constitute the majority of single parents (90 percent), the numbers of single fathers is increasing. While the numbers of widowers has remained constant over the years, there has been a 65 percent increase in single fathers due to separation and divorce between 1970-1979 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980a, 1980b). Lewis (1978) estimates that there are actually 1.5 million fathers rearing 3.5 million children for a total of 5 million single-father family members.

Fathers and Custody

Historically, and up to the middle of the 19th century, custody was automatically awarded to fathers. Men were not only better able to provide financially for their offspring, but fathers literally owned their children as well as their wives (Orthner and Lewis, 1979). At the beginning of the 20th century, courts started to award children to their mothers. Since then and up to about 10 years ago, fathers almost never received custody unless the mother had died or she was proven to be unfit. Nowdays there are three ways by which single father custody takes place.

1. Death of spouse. Before modern medicine, men became single parents primarily through maternal mortality at childbirth. The numbers of widowers has remained constant in recent years at about half million, or 569,000 to be exact. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980a, 1980b).

2. Adoption. Becoming a single father through adoption is a fairly new phenomenon since single parent adoption has just become available since 1950, with the first reported case in 1965. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1980a, 1980b) indicates that 52,000 father custody children fall in this category of never married, which includes formal (legal) or informal adoptive arrangements. Generally

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[1] In comparison to America, where 10 percent of single-parent families are headed by men only, Sweden reports about 20 percent, Canada is at 21 percent and Great Britian about 19 percent. (Schlesinger, 1978; Smith, 1978).

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adoption by single males involves boys and hard to place children (Lewis, 1978).

3. Separation and divorce. The largest percent of single fathers are separated or divorced. According to the most recent official figures (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980a, 1980b), there are 704,000 identified single father families.[2] Fathers can have custody by legal and nonlegal means. Nonlegally, children can live with fathers while mothers retain legal custody; this is a common occurrence. Child snatching is another reason for nonlegal custody. Legal or court ordered custody includes sole, split, divided or joint custody. Most single fathers have sole custody but the occurrence of joint custody is increasing.

Characteristics of single fathers

Socioeconomic status (SES). Fathers who have custody of their children are generally better educated, occupy more prestigious occupational roles, and receive higher income than fathers in the average two-parent household, and they are certainly better off than the average single mother. Although the exact monetary figures are not available, one third (33 percent) of single-mother households are below poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980a, 1980b) compared to 8.5 percent in male-headed households (Gersick, 1979).

Race. Although there has been a spectrum of racial representation in single father samples, the majority of single fathers appear to be caucasian. This finding is not too surprising and is consistent with higher SES for white males since most minorities have traditionally been excluded from higher education, income, and occupation. Conversely, about one third of single mothers are black (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980a,) which also correlates with the lower SES of black people and women in this country. One half of the black families with children at home are maintained by one parent, which is usually the mother.

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[2] It should again be pointed out that there are discrepancies between official and nonofficial statistics due to the reporting mechanisms in this country.

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Religion. Not all studies reported the religious affiliations of single fathers and their families. Hanson (1979) found a cross section of religions, with the percent of catholic, protestant and jewish fathers proportionate to that of the general public.

Age. The chronological age of single fathers varies from young to middle age. Although there were some younger "modern and liberated" men in these samples, the majority of fathers were older and well established. (Gersick, 1979; Hanson, 1979) Apparently, men who are well into their professional careers are more likely to have the physical and emotional resources necessary to fight for, receive, and maintain custody.

Employment. Single fathers usually remain employed after becoming single parents, continuing their career patterns as before. Single mothers, on the other hand, experience a rapid downward mobility whether they were employed or not before single parenthood (Santrock and Warsnak, 1979). Burden (1979) reported that of all women who become single mothers, 60 percent of them are unemployed or on welfare sometime during their single parenthood. It appears to be less socially acceptable for single fathers to remain home with young children and collect funds from social agencies, than it is for single mothers in our society.

Most single fathers appear to have found a syncronization between their occupational and familial roles. Those who are engaged in more flexible occupations, change to more compatible jobs, or who are able to reallocate their time and priorities, experience smoother transition into their new single parent roles (Mendes, 1976a, 1976b; Hanson, 1979). Gasser and Taylor (1976) found that single fathers reported some curtailment in their job related travel or upward career mobility on account of their more restricted home circumstances, but this didn't present a psychological problem for most men.

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Parental History. Several theories (social learning, identification, intergenerational continuity) indicate that fathers have learned how to parent by modeling and identifying with their own sexed parent. Although empirical data concerning this issue does not appear to be available about single mothers, several investigators asked single fathers questions about their earlier history with their own parents.

Mendes (1975, 1976a, 1976b) found that single fathers who actively sought custody seemed to identify with and emulate their mothers (and not their fathers) as role models. In a comparative study between fathers with and without custody, Gersick (1979) wrote that fathers with custody described more intense relationships with their mothers but felt distant from their fathers. Additionally, fathers with custody were more likely to have had mothers who were full time homemakers and they would have chosen their mothers rather than their fathers to live with, if the choice had had to be made when they were youngsters. Hanson (1979, 1980, 1981) reported that single fathers named their male parent (and not their mothers) as their primary parental model but most of the men felt they were much more emotionally affective and involved with their children than their own dads had been with them. In other words, they made a conscientious effort to be expressive and physically affectionate with their children. A question that still remains is, where do single fathers acquire the attitude, knowledge and skills to assume the primary nurturing role that children need, when men are not traditionally socialized for that role?

Homemaking skills. Although not all single fathers were active in household activities (house cleaning, cooking, laundry, etc.) before becoming single parents, there is evidence that most fathers experience little difficulty in taking on these additional duties (Gasser and Taylor, 1976; Mendes, 1975, 1976a, 1976b; Orthner, Brown and Ferguson, 1976; Victor and Winkler, 1977). In fact, contrary to common assumption, single fathers do not hire out or coerce

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relatives into taking on these responsibilities for them. Most of the housekeeping chores are shared with their children and when problems arise it is in the area of time and energy for meal preparation and housecleaning. Similar problems exist in single mother and two working parent homes.

Motivation for custody. Although single fathers seek and/or receive custody for a number of reasons following separation, many researchers discern between two distinct and different motivational origins. Gasser and Taylor (1976), Greene (1977), Hanson (1979, 1980, 1981), Mendes (1975, 1976a, 1976b), and Orthner, Brown, and Ferguson (1976) utilized a typology differentiating fathers who obtained custody by seeking it (adjudication) and fathers who assented to custody (allocation). One end of the spectrum implies active aggressiveness and the other end implies passiveness and/or resistiveness. In the studies reported, fathers who actively seek custody adjust faster and better to their roles as single parents, perform more adequately as parents, and view themselves as more nurturing parents. However, even though seekers spend more time initially in the parenting role, there is evidence that men who assent to custody also learn or adjust to their roles.

There is good reason to believe that fathers who have been involved in child care since early infancy, are more likely to actively seek custody and are better equipped both physically and emotionally to assume the primary care of their children. There was no indication that men who seek custody do so to spite their former wives or that men who have custody wish they did not. However, some custodial fathers felt their former spouses were equally fit to be custodial parents, and they, the fathers just happened to have custody at this time.

It is interesting that investigators have been interested in father's motivation for custody but no such issue usually arises when studying single mothers.

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Visitation and child support. There is a variety of visitation arrangements with the noncustodial mothers, providing they are still around. Some single fathers report a good relationship between themselves and their former spouses around the visitation issue, but most fathers report some of the same problems that single mothers report about the noncustodial parent. That is, she spends too much time with the children, she doesn't spend enough time, she doesn't show up when she is supposed to, the children return upset when they have been with her, I don't like her boyfriend (lifestyle, behavior), the children don't want to see her, she doesn't contribute anything to their welfare, etc. Actually, in a recent comparative study of single mothers and single fathers, Defrain and Eirick (1981) reported that single fathers are more likely to say negative things to their children about the noncustodial mother, than single mothers say about the noncustodial father. However, children in father custody homes are in more frequent contact with noncustodial parents than their counterparts in mother custody homes (Santrock and Warshak, 1979).

There seems to be less of a battle between "you pay child support or you don't see the kids" in single fathers homes than in single mother homes. This may be primarily due to the fact that few mothers are paying child support. Burden (1979) found thirty-four percent of noncustodial fathers still paying child support four years after divorce, while Hanson (1979) reported only ten percent of the noncustodial mothers paying child support. This difference may well be due to the overall discrepancy between men and women's education and salaries in our society. Child support should be an interesting issue to follow with most noncustodial mothers now working, and the recent enforceable child support laws.

Support systems. There is a growing recognition of the importance of strong social and kinship networks to provide emotional sustenance and promote healthy adjustment of parents and their children (Burden, 1979; Metcalf, 1980;

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Santrock and Warshak, 1979). Because of their sheer uniqueness, single fathers are supposed to conjure up more community sympathy and support. Common belief has it, that fathers are supposedly not as active as mothers in community organizations due to differences in the way that males and females are socialized. However, Santrock and Warshak (1979) found that not only are single fathers utilizing their extended family, professional, and community resources but they were using them to a higher degree than single custodial mothers. Gasser and Taylor (1976) and Hanson (1979) found that single fathers got especially involved with support and community agencies for the period of time they were in crisis (pre and post divorce), but they relinquished and changed these associations over time. Single fathers appear to know of other men in their circumstances, but they don't seem to seek companionship and support from each other. Single mothers, on the other hand, appear to be support systems for each other as well as for the single fathers they know. Actually the lack of suitable companions of the opposite sex is a common complaint of single parents of both sexes.

Defrain and Eirick (1981) found that single fathers were less likely than single mothers to move from their home and community following divorce. This continuous stability in home environment probably enhances the adjustment of the single-father family. No doubt this phenomenon is due to the more stable economic capability men have following divorce in comparison to women in the same situation.

Children of Single Fathers

Most of the work reported to date on single-father families is on the men themselves and what they report about parenting and their children. With the exception of two studies (Hanson, 1979, 1980, 1981; and Santrock and Warshak, 1979), information obtained directly from children is sparse. What do we know about children in single-father homes and how do these children relate to their dads.

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Sex and age of children. Although single fathers may have custody of both boys and girls of all ages, the typical picture is this. Single mothers usually have custody of the younger children, both male and female. If fathers have custody of children, it is more likely to be adolescent aged children. They are also more likely to have their teenage sons living with them since mothers generally retain custody of their teenage daughters (Orthner and Lewis, 1979). However, about one-third of single fathers are rearing daughters that range in age from infancy to young adulthood. Men do not appear to have anxiety over raising girls without mothers, although the issue of sex education, appropriate clothing, and hair styles become issues that fathers will seek help with for their daughters (Lynn, 1979).

For years, scholars have been concerned about the affect of parental absence on the sexual and social development of children. Most of the work in this area has studied the effects of father absence on boys. In one of the few studies comparing children from single mother, single father and two parents homes, Santrock and Warshak (1979) were interested in the interaction between the sex of child(ren), sex of parents, type of custody and the social development of children. They reported that children of single parents living with the same sex parent are better socially adjusted than children living with opposite sex parents.[3] That is, boys do better with fathers and girls are better off with mothers. If these findings hold up over time, it may affect the way that custody decisions are made in the future.

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[3] It should be noted that the type of parenting style and the amount of contact with additional adult caretakers was also associated with the positive social behaviors shown by these children.

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Child care arrangement. Single fathers tend to rely on the same child care resources in the community as do all other parents including single mothers. Despite their more favorable economic position, these men do not hire housekeepers to come into the family home for child care. Neither do they rely or depend on relatives or friends to provide babysitting. Fathers with preschool children utilized nursery and day care centers, fathers with young school age children paid neighbors to tend the children after school, and older children (age 10 and above) were usually left by themselves for short periods of time following school until the fathers came home (Lynn, 1979). Since single fathers tend not to be in frequent communication with each other, are less likely to exchange babysitting services than single mothers, and are usually working outside the home, they may use child-related community facilities even more than custodial mothers.

Father-child relationships. The quality and quantity of the early interaction between father and child makes a difference in the way they get along in their present relationship. Single fathers who interacted frequently and effectively with children from very early infancy, adjusted more readily to single parent roles (Orthner and Lewis, 1979; Gasser and Taylor, 1976), felt warmer and more comfortable with their custodial children (Lynn, 1979), were more likely to have sought custody, and they felt they were doing a good job (Mendes, 1975, 1976a, 1976b; Greene, 1977; Hanson 1979, 1980, 1981).

One of the common concerns expressed about men serving as primary custodians to young children, is their ability to provide emotional support and understanding, as well as physical and psychological nurturance. Hanson (1979, 1980, 1981) studied the quality of the relationship between single fathers and

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their children (ages 10-18) with a focus on the nurturing quality of their interaction. On four separate measures, she found that not only did fathers view themselves as affectionate nurturing parents, but children perceived their fathers as loving and concerned parents. Furthermore, fathers who sought custody viewed themselves more favorably than men who assented to custody. One of the interesting results of this study was the finding that children of single fathers reported their dads to be more nurturing than children rating either parent from two parent families.

Smith and Smith (1981) were concerned about the ability of single fathers to meet the emotional requirements of children. Their study showed that single fathers do meet the emotional needs of children, appropriate to their age and sex. They also wrote that the problems that single fathers did face, could be solved by the following strategies: (1) earlier preparation of men for parenthood, (2) more participation by men in household activities while still married, (3) increased involvement in the early discipline and limit setting of children, and (4) by learning to provide more nurturing supportive interaction with women and children early in the family's history.

In summary, there seems then to be ample evidence that men are capable primary parents and either know or learn the expressive behaviors necessary for effective father-child relationships.

CONCLUSION

Demographers prophesy that by 1990 approximately one out of every three American children will experience a single-parent home before they are 18 years of age (Glick, 1979). It is my belief that with the continuing trend of women opting for careers, the increased acceptance of men in more expressive roles, and the demonstrated competence and viability of single parent homes, that we can expect many more single-father homes in the future.

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Not only will we see more fathers as single parents, but they may well be the best choice of parent for children in many single-parent families. Lamb and Bronson (1980, p. 351) went so far as to state that "on an average, single custodial fathers are probably more likely than single mothers, to succeed in meeting the extensive demands placed on them due to the fact that they are a highly selective and self-motivated groups of men."

Even as a female, I might have to somewhat agree with that statement. I'm not advocating that we replace the supremacy of female parents with male parent supremacy, but we must finally acknowledge the fact that men are important members of the parenting team in two-parent families, and that single-father families are another acceptable and viable option in American society. Single fathers may well serve as the future prototype for the potential that all men have for caring and relating to children.

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